

Our Journey to a Path of Structured Literacy

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Background

The Canon-McMillan School District adopted a "balanced literacy" approach to reading in grades K-6 since 2007 which is designed to assess learners and identify their level of reading, utilize cueing techniques, memorize sight words and teach reading comprehension skills in isolation.

Unfortunately, balanced literacy has not been well supported by current or past research. Boxing students in a particular level often results in little reading skill growth. In addition, the reliance on independent or small group reading without the teacher has proven to be ineffective, whereas guided oral reading with the teacher has overwhelmingly proven to help children become better readers (National Reading Panel, 2000). In addition, one can argue that leveled reading is not supported by cognitive science in that it does not produce a level of desirable difficulty (Jaffe, 2011). An ideal learning experience that falls under a desirable difficulty is described as: Tasks that require considerable but desirable amount of effort, thereby improving long-term performance (Bjork, 1994). Teachers can ask varying scaled questions (i.e., Bloom's), help students make connections to prior knowledge and current content, formatively assess and spend more time with the content thus creating a deeper understanding. Students who have been taught decoding skills respond and grow as readers when exposed to higher level texts (Shanahan, 2022). Exposure to higher level texts also has a growth impact on vocabulary acquisition adding to overall increases in comprehension. Ultimately, we want to grow strong readers by expanding their reading opportunities instead of narrowing them to reading levels.

Our literacy program's "levels" were dependent on the Fountas & Pinnell Assessment System's ability to identify accurate reading levels. According to Klingbeil, McComas, Burns & Helman (2015), the only independent research done to determine the system's actual accuracy showed it had an accuracy rate of 54% to determine a student's reading level. A testing system that requires teachers to take 20-30 minutes per student with an accuracy of 54% is simply not worth its time. This is a tremendous loss of instructional time. Even more concerning, when the tool is used to identify struggling readers, the tool's accuracy drops to 31% (Klingbeil et al., 2015).

What does the research say about how students learn best?

The National Reading Panel (2000) conducted research on over 100,000 reading studies on how children learn to read. The evidence was outstanding that children learn to read best through the implementation of a systematic (structured) reading program:

- ✓ Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness
- ✓ Systematic phonics instruction.
- ✓ Methods to improve fluency.
- ✓ Ways to enhance comprehension through content knowledge and vocabulary development.

A strong focus on decoding skills at the early elementary level was also reinforced by Pennsylvania's recent Pennsylvania's new House Bill 2045 which promotes schools to place emphasis on training and implementation of such practices.

A laser focus on decoding in the early grades coupled with a strong knowledge and vocabulary development component (reading to learn and writing to learn opportunities) has been coined "Structured Literacy" also known as the "Science of Reading" (Connecticut Department of Education, 2022). The key word is structured. Unlike balanced literacy, the structured reading approach has a focus on whole group reading with the teacher leading the discussion. It also covers less topics but goes more in depth with those topics to build strong knowledge and vocabulary backgrounds. This does not mean there are no opportunities for small-group or partner-group activities. However, the main instructional component is a focus on the teacher delivering explicit instruction before any other reinforcing instructional strategies (e.g., think-pair-share, independent practice, etc.). Clarification: While explicit instruction and direct instruction are used interchangeably at times, there is a distinction. Explicit instruction is not the teacher reading from a text verbatim. The teacher

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has autonomy in lesson design with explicit instruction. It is simply a shift to a more teacher-centered approach vs. student-centered (e.g., centers, inquiry learning, etc.) approach.

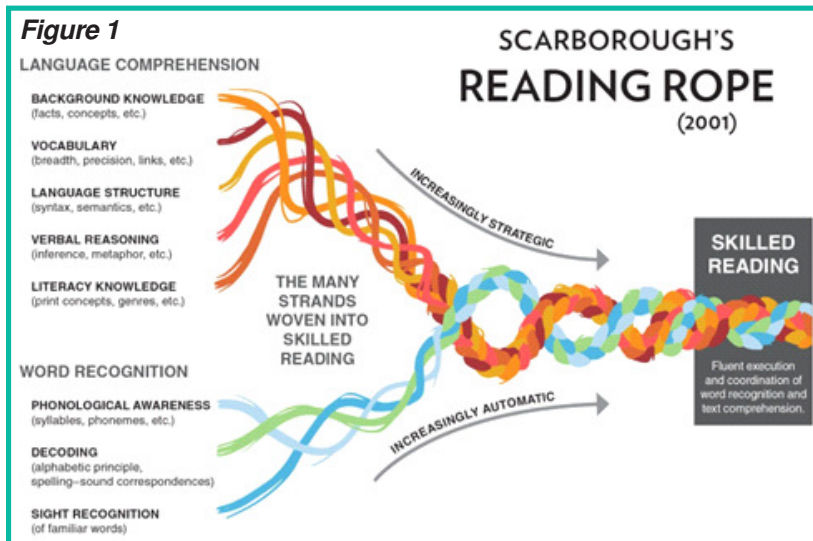
Strong readers have background knowledge in the content and vocabulary that they are reading. In particular, content that is rich in social studies and science is integral at all grade levels. A common practice is to sacrifice these subject areas to concentrate more on teaching students how to read. This practice does not afford students the opportunity to gain crucial background knowledge and enhance their vocabulary which leads to strong skilled readers. As students move into the middle and high school levels, this becomes especially important as many of their classes are content heavy.

Fortunately, the district started partly in this direction a few years back with the adoption of a formal phonics and decoding curriculum in grades K-1 and second grade this school year. In addition, we purchased Geodes (decodable, knowledge-building texts) for our K-2 teachers and provided training on the use of them this school year. Therefore, the wheels were in motion to develop students' phonological awareness, decoding skills and sight recognition, half of Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001), but the other half which entails knowledge, language and vocabulary was critically missing. We used this visual to create a structured literacy program that is based on research. **(See Figure 1)**

Roadmap

With a mission to develop skilled readers, we created a literacy roadmap. This roadmap outlines how we put ourselves on a path to structured literacy and is one that can be duplicated.

This is a monumental shift in mindset requiring strategic planning and collective input from key stakeholders: Administration, Teachers and School Board. The following checkpoints outline how we tackled this challenge to put our school district on the path of a structured literacy program aligned to best practices.



Checkpoint One

The first step was to determine where the teachers' and principals' mindset was with balanced literacy. Was there a concern among our teachers and principals about our literacy approach? A survey was distributed to K-6 educators asking them where they rated our benchmark literacy program. On a four-point Likert Scale, 78% rated it as a one or two!

Follow-up discussions with principals and teacher groups identified that they have been concerned over the balanced literacy approach.



Pilot teachers debriefing about their experience with CKLA and Amplify.

Checkpoint Two

A core literacy team, aka The CM Literacy Task Force, was established consisting of a K-4 principal, 5-6 principal, our two reading specialist co-department heads, a sampling of K-4 teachers and the assistant to the superintendent for K-6 curriculum and instruction. The charge for this task force was to research knowledge building reading programs, help provide education on structured literacy to the K-6 level as well as the board of education and recommend a structured ELA program to be piloted by a larger group of K-6 teachers.

Checkpoint Three

It is important to establish a relationship of transparency and trust with the board. Therefore, the literacy team presented a thorough presentation to our school board's curriculum committee members explaining our current status and the need to move to a research-supported structured literacy approach. The curriculum committee was in full support of the move after the presentation.

Checkpoint Four

Since grades K-2 already had a head start on a complete Scarborough's Rope approach to reading, we decided to focus our efforts on grades three through six. After visiting neighboring school districts and researching materials, we decided to pilot Amplify's CKLA (K-5) and ELA (6) knowledge reading programs. The pilot group consisted of three third grade, three fourth grade, two fifth grade and four sixth grade teachers. The pilot teachers received a full day of training and ongoing, continued support in and around structured literacy.

After teaching one extensive unit of CKLA, the pilot teachers came together to share experiences. The meeting was emotional and inspiring to hear one successful story after another with a common theme of previously struggling students who are now seeing success with the new program. Common themes were (Taranto, 2023):

- ✓ Increased levels of student confidence.
- ✓ Increased levels of participation.
- ✓ Increased interest and finding connections outside of school.
- ✓ "Struggling" readers participating and doing well in class.

Shared stories included a fourth-grade teacher who was teaching a geology themed reading unit and highlighted a typically reserved student in her class bringing tiny geodes for all his classmates as Valentine's gifts in alignment with the recent ELA unit focus. Two of the sixth-grade teachers also shared joint concerns around a particular student who was struggling in English and Language Arts classes. However, with the introduction and pilot of this new program, they have seen a direct and complete turnaround in their performance responding to the CKLA units of study.

Both students and teachers alike have found a new source of inspiration.

Checkpoint 5

With the change in mindset, a need for professional development was also addressed so that all teachers understood the research behind moving to a structured approach. It was necessary to bolster confidence and expertise with this change. Teachers having a clear vision and reason for proceeding with this approach allows them to teach with fidelity and focus. Teachers are all on the same page across the district moving forward with Structured Literacy and the necessary instruction.

Conclusion

Developing a structured literacy program at the K-6 level that is aligned to best practices will ultimately lead to students becoming strong readers who can make meaning of complex text they read. As students transition from K-6 to the secondary level they will have the necessary skills to continue to build upon and expand their core knowledge. By aligning all stakeholders from the school board, principals, teachers, and parents a successful change effort is guaranteed. By continually revisiting the goal and checking progress and reporting that progress, excitement builds and grows among the community ensuring the continued success of students. With the added support at the state level, more stakeholders are becoming invested as well. Universities and school districts are required to teach Structured Literacy and the movement will continue to move forward because the teachers they are growing are the future for our students.

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